

The Center for Media and Public Affairs

at George Mason University

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Obama Leads the Media Race As Well Study Finds McCain, Palin Get More Negative Press on TV News

Barack Obama has widened his lead over John McCain in the race for good press, and Sarah Palin's press has turned sharply negative on network news shows, according to a new study by Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA). The study also finds that network news coverage is more substantive than in other recent presidential campaigns.

These results are the latest update from the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) 2008 Election News Watch Project. They are based on a scientific content analysis of 585 election news stories that aired from August 23 through September 30 (12 hours 57 minutes of airtime) that aired on ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and Fox Special Report (first half hour) from August 23 to September 30. We report on all on-air evaluations of the candidates by sources and reporters, after excluding comments by the campaigns and their surrogates.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Obamamania: Since the party conventions kicked off the final phase of the presidential campaign, comments about Senator Barack Obama on the network evening news shows have been 65% positive, compared to only 36% positive comments about Senator John McCain.

Souring on Sarah: Despite a brief flurry of good press during the GOP convention, comments about Governor Sarah Palin have been only 42% positive. (There have been too few evaluations of Senator Joe Biden for meaningful analysis.)

Back to the Future: This represents a return to Obama's favorable media image during the primary season, when his coverage was 62% positive on the broadcast networks. By contrast, McCain's coverage during the primaries was only 34% positive, almost the same as his general election coverage.

The Fox Difference: On Fox News Channel, by contrast, Obama's press has been only 28% positive during the general election, even worse than the 38% positive evaluations of McCain. Palin's coverage has been 49% positive on Fox, slightly higher on than on the three networks.

Examples:

Obama Positive: [As a community organizer] Obama worked to open a jobs center. He also helped residents fight to rid their housing projects of asbestos. [People] in this community say Barack Obama's work here inspires them to this day. -- Kevin Tibbles, NBC, 10/2

His message of change is something that I, for one, am looking for...-- voter, CBS, 9/28

Obama Negative: While Obama denounces cozy Washington relationships triggering financial chaos, he was one of the top Senate recipients of campaign contributions from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac... -- Major Garret, FOX, 9/17

McCain Negative: In this week's advertising, McCain went relentlessly negative, in some cases resorting to falsehood. -- Wyatt Andrews, CBS, 9/12

When deregulation was the wave in Washington, he surfed that wave. Now it's not and the populist inside John McCain is out. -- George Will, ABC, 9/17

Palin Negative: But you were for it [the bridge from nowhere], before you were against it. You were solidly

for it... until Congress pulled the plug. -- Charles Gibson, ABC, 9/12

Substance Beats Horse Race Substantive coverage of policy issues and the candidates' records has outpaced horse race coverage of their poll standings and campaign strategies by 36% to 31% of all stories on the broadcast networks, for only the second time since 1988. On Fox, however, only 31% of the coverage was substantive, and 44% dealt with the horse race.

CMPA is a non-profit, non-partisan research organization which is affiliated with George Mason University. It has monitored every presidential election since 1988 using the same methodology, in which trained coders tally all mentions of candidates and issues and all evaluations of candidates. For previous CMPA findings on the 2008 elections: http://cmpa.com/studies_election_08.htm